



U.S. Immigration  
and Customs  
Enforcement

# News Release

December 1, 2004

## **CULTURAL ANTIQUITY RETURNED TO YEMEN AFTER ICE INVESTIGATION** *-- Alabaster Stele Dating To 300-400 A.D. Was Stolen from Yemen's Aden Museum in 1994 --*

NEW YORK, N.Y. -- Michael J. Garcia, the Department of Homeland Security Assistant Secretary for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and His Excellency Abdulla M. Al-Saidi, the Ambassador of the Republic of Yemen, today announced the return of a stolen fourth-century cultural antiquity to the government of Yemen.

In a ceremony at the New York Special Agent-in-Charge office of ICE, Assistant Secretary Garcia returned the antiquity known as the "South Arabian Alabaster Stele" to Ambassador Al-Saidi. The stele (or plaque) depicts Dat-Hamim, a goddess of fertility, and dates to the period 300-400 A.D. The antiquity was stolen from the Aden Museum in Yemen in July 1994, during a period of civil unrest in that nation.

"This ancient stele is not a commodity to be sold to the highest bidder, but a cultural treasure that belongs to the people of Yemen. I am pleased to return this precious antiquity to its rightful owners and am proud of the ICE investigators who made it possible," said Assistant Secretary Garcia.

ICE agents recovered the South Arabian Alabaster Stele in New York after a lengthy investigation that began in March 2001. At that time, ICE agents in New York began scrutinizing a well-known antiquities company called **Phoenix Ancient Art S.A.** and its owners for trafficking in illegally-obtained art and antiquities. Brothers **Hicham and Ali Aboutaam**, both Lebanese nationals with Canadian citizenship, own Phoenix Ancient Art S.A. The Aboutaam brothers are leading suppliers of museum-quality Mediterranean and Near East antiquities from their galleries in New York, Geneva, Switzerland, and Beirut, Lebanon.



In May 2003, ICE agents learned that Phoenix and the Aboutaam brothers had consigned the South Arabian Alabaster Stele to Sotheby's in New York for inclusion in an upcoming auction, with an estimated sale price of approximately \$20,000 to \$30,000. Phoenix had advised Sotheby's that the antiquity was from a private

English collection. However, Sotheby's researchers soon found descriptions and photos of the Stele in a scholarly volume indicating it belonged to the collection of the Aden Museum in Yemen.

Sotheby's declined to auction the Stele and advised Phoenix that it would contact the Aden Museum in Yemen to clarify the status of the antiquity. Phoenix requested that Sotheby's not contact the Aden Museum and instead allow Phoenix to return the antiquity to the gallery where it was purchased. Meanwhile, ICE agents in New York and the ICE Attaché Office in Rome, Italy, were able to obtain proof that the South Arabian Alabaster Stele was, in fact, stolen from the Aden Museum in Yemen in 1994.

In September 2003, ICE agents executed a seizure warrant and took possession of the Stele. In December 2003, the Stele was ultimately forfeited to the U.S. government. Meanwhile, the ICE investigation into Phoenix and the Aboutaam brothers continued.

ICE agents arrested Hicham Aboutaam in December 2003 on charges of illegally importing an Iranian antiquity valued at close to \$1 million. According to the complaint filed at the time, Aboutaam had imported an Iranian ceremonial drinking vessel that was known as the "Silver Griffin" and that dated to 700 B.C. In importing the Iranian antiquity, Aboutaam falsely represented to U.S. border inspectors that the vessel originated in Syria, knowing that it originated in Iran. In June 2004, Aboutaam pleaded guilty to presenting a false commercial invoice to U.S. border inspectors in connection with the Silver Griffin import.

# ICE #

*U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement is the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security.*